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'Gentrification' — urban movement, but small

Chester Smolski

It appears that the gentry are returning to the city in droves, snapping up old Federal, Victorian and Greek revival structures in some of our declining and marginal neighborhoods, rehabilitating these structurally sound buildings, and driving up the value of surrounding properties, with a resultant upgrading of the neighborhoods in which they are located. In the process the poor and moderate income residents no longer can afford to live in their old neighborhoods, and are being forced from their communities by this avalanche of affluent professionals who have rediscovered the joys of urban

living. At least this is what the media would have us believe, but is this really the case?

In this country we love to make use of words for which the English have a great proclivity — "amenities" and "percs" have become common parlance now. The latest one to catch our attention is "gentrification", i.e., the return to the city of the gentry, that group of upper income, single or small family professionals who are forsaking the joys of suburbia or simply starting out their household formations in a place discovered to have job opportunities, culture, excitement, easy transportation and a multiplicity of activities concentrated in one location — the city. And, most important, they are finding old buildings with elaborate porticoes, detailed cornices, granite lintels and a host of other architectural and design fea-

tures that are almost impossible to duplicate at today's prices, and completely incongruous in a raised ranch suburban setting. With borrowed capital and much of their own work, (often with years of effort,) they are upgrading and restoring these structures. In the process they are increasing the tax base, enhancing the neighborhood, serving as a catalyst for

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others to do similar rehabilitation to surrounding buildings, and ultimately upgrading the entire community.

The major problem associated with city decline is the flight of white middle class America to the suburbs, together with subsequent commercial and industrial activities, leaving behind a tax depleted city to inadequately serve the needs of those who stayed behind, i.e., the poor, elderly and minorities. It would appear that returning gentry would be one of the ingredients necessary for city revitalization and thus would be welcomed into a community. City problems are not that easily resolved.

The problem has surfaced in the strong Fox Point neighborhood of Providence where the question of relocating six buildings from a proposed Wheeler School building site to the corner of John and Brook Streets is being questioned by the residents. The current eye-sore of a vacant lot, formerly occupied by Bond Bread, seemed a logical place to locate these buildings and sell them off at prices ranging from \$47,400 to \$65,000. Not inordinately high in today's market, with some houses in that neighborhood currently selling for close to \$100,000, but too high for many of the residents, some of whom have lived there for years and who would like to buy and remain in their own neighborhood.

The initial disapproval of the Fox Point Community Organization (FPCO) Board prompted Brown University, owner of the site, to withdraw the land from the market. Opposition by some of the residents who live close to the site and wanted it developed, prompted a subsequent meeting of the entire FPCO organization. A close vote indicated a change in position, with the group wanting Brown to sell and have the developer move the houses to the site. The close and less than decisive vote of the FPCO has raised questions at Brown, which is now reconsidering its earlier decision for the site. It will not be an easy decision. Some residents will be unhappy about it, especially those members of the FPCO who feel that

the sale of such houses on the site will accelerate the gentrification process and weaken this distinctive ethnic neighborhood.

One reads that gentrification is occurring in other parts of the city and in other cities across the country. Structures in Elmwood are undergoing such change and cities such as Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore are also experiencing this process, but recent data do not substantiate this contrary to what the media are saying.

The movement of people is still away from our cities: whether one talks of Providence which lost 14,000 residents from 1970 to 1976, making it the fourth largest city in New England; the three of five cities of more than 100,000 population in America which lost population in the same period of time; or the approximately 275 central cities in our nation which lost two million white people from 1976 to 1977. In the words of the Census Bureau which determined that 34.2 percent of Americans changed their address from 1975 to 1978, "If an area has a net loss of population, the movers are likely to be younger and better educated than those left behind — a greater loss to the area of origin than mere numbers would imply."

But there are those who also move to our cities. In the tradition of this country, it is the less educated, the poor, the non-English speaking immigrants who come to get work, seek the better life and contribute to this unique nation of ours. Few of us realize, for example, that there are now over 1,000 Hmongs (Indochinese refugees from Laos) living in Providence, having come here in the past three years. City and private agencies will help provide for their specialized needs, and, in time, like others before them (Asians have proven to be among our most "successful" immigrants), will find work, buy homes, send their children to college and further strengthen our society. But during this period of transition it becomes the city's responsibility to prepare for entrance to a very different culture.

Yes, the news media will publicize gentrification, some neighborhoods will be affected by it, and some will see this return to the city as the hope of the future. But we must not forget that it is a small movement, limited to selected neighborhoods and cities, and it will be a time before any major impact will be felt. A proposed six houses on 1.3 acres in Fox Point single out the problem in a strong neighborhood, but as one drives on Doyle Avenue, Adelaide Avenue and other streets of the city to see the burned and boarded houses, one can only wish that these valuable buildings be put back to productive use, whether by the gentry or others who come to revitalize our urban centers.

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